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SOCIETÀ PER GLI STUDI SUL MEDIO ORIENTE

TITOLO: RETHINKING RESISTANCE IN MIDDLE EASTERN POPULAR MUSIC

PROPONENTE/I: - **STEFANO BARONE** (UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL LANCASHIRE, UNITED KINGDOM)
POLLY WITHERS (LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS, UNITED KINGDOM)

ABSTRACT:

The panel interrogates the multiple meanings of “resistance” as applied to popular music in the MENA region. Especially since the Arab Springs, media and scholarly accounts have often voiced a reading of Middle Eastern music, and pop culture, as inherently resistant: cultural practices become meaningful insofar as they voice a rebellion against national regimes, and against a monolithic conception of power. Such understandings have roots in a broader scientific tradition, dating at least to 1970s British cultural studies – one that identifies resistance against the social order as the essence of grassroots popular culture. The contributions in this panel go beyond such a “struggle paradigm” (Swedenburg, 2012) by questioning and nuancing resistance. First, popular music does not solely protest against the political establishment: different musicians and music scenes interact with the local infrastructures of power in a variety of ways, often meshing refusal, co-optation, and the co-production of power relationships. Moreover, in Middle Eastern societies music may become an ambit in which new and unexpected political identities emerge, thus exceeding the resistance category as projected from the outside. Local musicians, fans and scenesters build their own understandings and targets of resistance: their multiple resistances may target class and social inequalities, gender and racial orders, or religious conflicts. Discussing examples from across the MENA region and its musical scenes, the panel will retrace such multiple resistances and question the ways in which they complicate standard conceptions of power and rebellion.

PROFILO ACCADEMICO DEL/DELLA/DEI/DELLE PROPONENTE/I:

Stefano Barone teaches Sociology at the University of Central Lancashire (England). His research focuses on the metal, rap, and electro music scenes in post-revolutionary Tunisia. Stefano has published several articles and is currently working on a monograph about Tunisian underground music.

Polly Withers, Ph.D., is an ESRC Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Media and Communications, at the London School of Economics. Her interests include cultural studies, gender studies, queer theory, anthropology, and performance studies. Currently, she is working on an ethnographic and gender-sensitive monograph about the “alternative” music scene in post-Oslo Palestine

PANEL PAPERS

1. *Save your life*. Resistance, discipline, and the political economy of Tunisian rap

(Dr Stefano Barone, University of Central Lancashire)

The paper reconstructs the political economy of rap music in post-revolutionary Tunisia: it shows how politics, in different forms, penetrates the scene economy and disciplines it through several mechanisms of inclusion and repression. Since the 2010/2011 Revolution, and the arrest of rapper El General in the last days of the regime of Zine el Abidine Ben Ali, rap established itself as the most important musical phenomenon in the country. Tunisians and foreign observers came to celebrate it as a quintessential site of anti-system struggle and expression of social conflict. But the scene lacks the infrastructures of a proper musical industry, and the fame of rappers often remains confined to the virtual sphere. In order to address this problem, some rappers have no choice but to compromise with several facets of the political establishment. They have to accept legal disciplinary frames that allow them to be considered “artists” and to play live and profit for their music. In some cases, rappers have made revenues by singing at party meetings and supporting political candidates. More often, they participate into international projects based on rap as an instrument of social empowerment: in such cases, rappers diversely react to the political agendas implicit in these projects. In the meantime, police repression of rappers has never stopped since the Revolution. As a result, the logics of inclusion and repression that pervade the scene fashion rap as a site in which discipline and power are not simply resisted, but are rather co-constructed from below.

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2. *Beyond Resistance: Liminal Politics in Palestine Music*

(Dr Polly Withers, London School of Economics)

Palestinian popular music is normally researched through two lenses: as folkloric identity or national resistance. This paper offers a different interpretation of a Palestinian music scene, which its affiliates describe as “alternative”, that stretches beyond these theoretical straitjackets. Based on two years (2012, 2014, 2017-2018) ethnographic fieldwork in Ramallah, Haifa, Jerusalem, Amman, and London’s sonic spaces, it explores how these musicians, DJs, and fans, negotiate “everyday” power structures through music. I argue that neoliberalism (through increased money and time for leisure) shapes this scene outside established frameworks. Musicians and their fans form shared identities through consumption. They meet in bars, parties, and raves they code

“avant-garde”, where they buy and sell alcohol, tickets, clothes, and subcultural music to generate “underground” capitals. While youth claim alterity to neoliberalism, their alternate positions are therefore stabilised through that order, which their practices produce and are product. However, neoliberal sovereignty is necessarily incomplete. Contra social individuation, young adults use these sites to have fun, share music, dance, socialise, discuss social and political views, and affect collective belongings. Seen through feminist and queer lenses, many of these practices re-imagine the gender binary, and forge ‘new’ gendered and sexuality-based subjectivities. Their iterative practices thus also enact liminal zones where atomised neoliberal (and other) normativities are temporarily bracketed, and unconventional socio-political roles rehearsed. Such restricted politics are neither resistant nor complicit. Rather, they expose the contradictory nature of a neoliberal order that fixes and contains, while at the same time leaving space for iterative agencies to emerge.

Polly Withers, Ph.D., is an ESRC Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Media and Communications, at the London School of Economics. Her interests include cultural studies, gender studies, queer theory, anthropology, and performance studies. Currently, she is working on an ethnographic and gender-sensitive monograph about the “alternative” music scene in post-Oslo Palestine

4. Economies of resistance in the Moroccan rap scene: economic censorship, digital platforms and networks of solidarity

(Dr Cristina Moreno-Almeida, King’s College London)

At the beginning of 2000s, rap music in Morocco found itself in a privileged position favoured by a state and urban elites who imagined rappers and hip hop culture as ambassadors of a modern, moderate and liberal ‘new’ Morocco. Many commentators have framed Moroccan hip hop within the co-option vs. youthful cultural resistance narrative. In this manner, studies on how the economy of culture works in the context of the MENA region are often neglected in favour of Political narratives, especially those that focus on resistance and opposition to governance. Yet, in order to create, distribute and promote music, artists need to find a way to subsist and to keep making music, an issue that affects the way they produce music and music videos as much as the content of their cultural production. In contexts where the state is the main patron of the arts as is the case in Morocco, therefore, *who* makes music is not only very much related to official Political narratives, but is key in understanding the politics of the cultural field. In this paper, I present the case of rappers in Morocco to show the strategies of independent rappers in overcoming state control through the use of digital platforms, networks of solidarity and pop-up shops to sell merchandise. Through these lenses, could the act of independently releasing an album be an act of resistance regardless of its lyrical content?

Cristina Moreno Almeida, PhD, is a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Digital Humanities at King’s College London. She has published on the youth, culture, and resistance in North Africa and the Middle East. Her new book is entitled *Rap Beyond Resistance: Staging Power in Contemporary Morocco* (Palgrave, 2017).